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# THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ITALIAN PARTISANS TO THE ALLIED WAR EFFORT

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## Description

An analysis of the number of Italian partisans and the type and extent of the contribution made by them to the Allied war effort in Italy.

31 March 1945

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51

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## Contents


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Summary | | iii |
| I. | Background and Motivation | 1 |
| II. | Organization and Extent of the Partisan Movement | 3 |
| III. | Activities | 7 |
| IV. | Relations between Partisans and Allied Military Forces | 11 |
| V. | Relations with the Royal Italian Government | 14 |

SUMMARY

1. The partisan movement has developed from poorly coordinated clandestine bands to an organization able to offer considerable military and political-economic support to the Allied war effort in Italy.

2. Partisan ideology has resulted in the organization of two separate resistance movements. Although many patriots enlisted for reasons of expediency, more idealistic motivations appear to have influenced the majority, and particularly the leaders. These motivations may be divided into two categories: a) politico-economic and b) military. The so-called "political" partisans organized under the banner of various political parties, the most important of which were Communist, Socialist, Action Party, and Christian Democrat. The military partisans, former elements of the Italian Army, maintain close connection with the Italian High Command and recognize its authority: they are regarded as regular army units.

3. Although exact determination of the number of partisans is impossible, reasonably precise estimates indicate that there were about 99,800 "political" partisans active in Northern Italy at the end of November 1944. This number varies considerably from time to time depending upon season, availability of supply, the course of the war, and other factors. In addition, there is said to be a large number of potential partisans from which the movement may recruit its strength. There were about 82,000 military partisans active in Northern Italy at the end of 1944, according to the Italian Government.

4. Partisan activity is of four types: a) military operations in which partisan units engage enemy troops or otherwise carry out predominantly military maneuvers; b) sabotage and seizure of enemy materiel;

c) military intelligence service for the Allies; d) the creation of civil disorder or passive resistance such as the organization of strikes or labor slow-downs.

5. Relations between the partisans and Allies are complicated by the nature of the partisan organizations and the conditions under which they necessarily operate. Despite these difficulties, significant strides have been made in coordinating partisan and Allied activities.

6. Allied assistance for the partisan movement has been furnished since May 1943, when the Allies first formally recognized the resistance movement. Partisan leaders, however, have often complained that they do not receive the military support their record merits. In addition, the post-liberation treatment accorded to the partisans by the Allies has been a major source of discontent.

7. In view of the Allied interest in the partisans, relations between them and the Italian Government have of necessity been largely a function of the relations of both with the Allied Force Headquarters. The present Cabinet has, however, been particularly active, and partially successful, in attempting to overcome Allied hesitation regarding close liaison with the partisans and to champion the cause of the forces of anti-Fascist resistance.

## I. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

### A. Origins.

It is not possible to determine either the date or point of origin of the Italian partisan movement. Some Partisan bands trace their genesis to the clandestine anti-Fascist organizations such as the Socialist, Action, and Communist parties which existed before the fall of the Mussolini regime. Others were organized after the ouster of the Duce in an attempt to defend Italy against the Germans. Still others were the result of chance concentrations of army personnel and civilian refugees who "took to the mountains" when their military units were routed by superior German forces or when the Germans overran farming or urban communities.

From this uncertain beginning the partisan movement has developed to its present state, in which it is able to offer organized resistance to German and neo-Fascist military forces, carry out planned sabotage programs, act as an important part of the intelligence service of Allied military forces, and prepare to re-establish civil administration when the occupied areas are liberated. In this progress of partisan evolution the following dates all marked significant increases in partisan strength and activity: 20 April 1944, marking the formation of a liberalized cabinet under Marshal Badoglio; 11 May 1944, the date on which the United Nations renewed their advance up the Italian Peninsula; and 4 June, the date of the liberation of Rome. On 22 May 1944 General Alexander, then Commander of the Allied Armies in Italy (AAI), publicly recognized the military value of the partisans for the first time by noting that they were "holding in check six German divisions." Although there have been momentary setbacks from time to time since,

the partisans have, according to both Allied and enemy reports, and to their own claims, steadily developed in both numbers and effectiveness.

B. Partisan Ideology.

Partisan ideology, particularly in the formative stage of the movement, tended to vary greatly from band to band, In many cases individual soldiers joined together as a result of finding themselves separated from their military formations and virtually abandoned in the mountainous regions. Others were possibly attracted by what may have appeared to be an adventurous existence. Deeper-lying motivations, however, seem to have been the causative factors influencing large numbers of the individual partisans and particularly the partisan leaders. These motives may be divided into (1) politico-economic and (2) military.

1. Politico-Economic. By the time of Allied landings in Italy proper, the anti-Fascist resistance movement had already been organized by several underground parties operating throughout the peninsula. Of these groups, the Action Party's Justice and Liberty (Giustizia e Liberta) bands, the Socialist and Communist local cells, and Christian Democratic groups appear to have taken the lead. All of these opposed Fascism on political and/or economic grounds; individual members seem to have joined for one or more reasons: they were attracted by the political program of the group they entered; they were disgruntled by Nazi-neo-Fascist economic regimentation; they hated the German invader; or they were soldiers or civilians whose normal lives and means of livelihood had been interrupted by the war. These "political" groups organized and took part in active operations, largely in the nature of sabotage, against the Fascist regime and its German protector.

2. Military. The so-called military partisans comprised elements of the Italian army which found themselves in German-occupied territory at the time of the collapse of the Fascist regime. These groups, under the leadership of their officers, maintained liaison with the Italian High Command in liberated Italy, and undertook limited military operations against both the Republican Fascist Government's troops and the Germans.

## II. ORGANIZATION AND EXTENT OF THE PARTISAN MOVEMENT

### A. Numbers.

While it is not possible to present a precise statement of the current partisan strength, both because military security makes such figures unavailable and because partisan organization is even now not sufficiently standardized to render an accurate census practicable, over-all numbers can be estimated for the two groups ("political" and military) discussed below.

1. "Political" Partisans. It is in this category that determination of membership is most difficult since many of the partisan organizations not only have floating memberships, but are apparently hostile to other partisan groups operating in their territory and supporting conflicting ideologies. Moreover, membership in the active partisan organizations is affected by seasonal changes, by the availability of arms and ammunition, and by Allied fortunes in their related effect on partisan morale. Despite these fluctuations, membership in the partisan units appears to show a steady growth, part of which is due in all likelihood to increased effectiveness of organization.

In July and August, 1944, there were reported to be about 32,000 partisans operating in the Provinces of Emilia, Liguria, Lombardy,

Piedmont, Tuscany, Veneto, and Venezia Tredentina; in November, 1944, about 71,700 partisans were active in Emilia, Liguria, Lombardy, and Piedmont; and in December, 1944, about 99,800 were reportedly organized in Emilia-Romagna, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, and Veneto. It should be noted, however, that these figures are compiled from scattered reports indicating partisan strength in localized areas; they are, therefore, incomplete and unquestionably do not reflect the partisans' true strength.

In addition, there are said to be many thousands of potential partisans among the discontented elements of the population, who would willingly resist the Germans and neo-Fascists if the personal cost were not too great and if supplies to maintain effective operations were to become available. No accurate estimate of the number of these potential partisans is available, although political leaders and other interested sources in liberated Italy have stated that they number as many as 500,000 persons.

It appears that in the work of organizing the various "political" bands, the Communists are generally conceded to have been the most effective; in fact, Communist-led bands are organized into divisions, brigades, and even smaller units, and Communist recruiting is said to be active and widespread. At the same time, it is reported that not more than 30 percent of the membership of bands so organized is actually enrolled in the Communist Party, or even committed to the Communist ideology. The Socialist and Action parties, which, like the Communists, draw their strength from urban areas, have also taken part in the work of organization and planning of operations; while the Christian Democratic Party, drawing its followers from rural areas, appears to be less organized despite its large following.

Mention should also be made of the part which has been played in the partisan movement by Allied personnel: both those who have simply found themselves at large in enemy occupied Italy, such as escaped British and American prisoners-of-war and airmen forced down behind the enemy lines; and officers deliberately sent into Northern Italy for the express purpose of establishing contact with and additional leadership for known patriot units. Many of the most effective civilian, or "political" bands have operated under the leadership of these men.

2. Military Partisans. According to the Italian General Staff, which claims to maintain close liaison with units of the Italian Army in Northern Italy, there were approximately 82,000 "military" partisans operating in Emilia, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, Tuscany, and Veneto in the last months of 1944.

B. Coordination of Command.

Lack of coordination in the partisan movement has in the past apparently constituted its greatest weakness, a not unnatural defect when the divergent political orientation of the partisan groups, their varied organizations and the difficulties under which they operate are taken into consideration. Military liaison with Allied military forces has to a large extent been effected through the instrumentality of military officers detailed to serve with the partisans by the Allied Command. In addition, however, both the Italian Government and the Committee of National Liberation for Northern Italy (CLNAI) have directed every effort toward unification of the partisan movement. During the summer of 1944 a Unified Command was established under the military direction of General Cadorna, assisted by Feruccio Parri (Action Party) and Luigi Longo (Gallo) (Communist Party). Both Parri and Gallo are

important members of the Central CLNAI for occupied Italy and apparently serve as political commissars in the partisan movement. No precise information as to the effectiveness of this Supreme Partisan Command is available.

It is also significant that as the partisan movement has become unified, the political orientation of the patriots has assumed increased importance, and the relations of the CNLAI and the partisan movement, originally haphazard, show a tendency to draw closer together. It is probable that upon the liberation of Northern Italy the partisan movement and the CNLAI will be found to have coalesced -- the partisans constituting a military branch of the over-all political organization.

C. Finances.

As the partisan movement developed and its military operations increased, the problem of over-all financing became more acute. According to Allied estimates, the cost per month of maintaining one partisan away from his home district -- an increasingly important factor as the movement becomes military in character and its members shift from one area to another following tactical dictates -- rose from 1000 to 3000 lire between June and December 1944. Part of partisan expenses are met by Allied funds and supplies made available to bands having liaison with the Allied military forces. It is also probable that the Italian Government provides funds for partisan organizations, particularly the military formations, recognized by it*. In addition, the major political parties in liberated Italy, especially the well-disciplined Communists and Socialists, attempt to finance the movement by levies upon

*In this connection, it should be recalled that the military partisans are considered an integral part of the Italian Army by the Rome Government.

their members and by various financial campaigns, the proceeds of which go to their associates in the North. The Christian Democrats are said to have adopted a similar procedure.

Despite these sources of funds, it seems clear that additional funds, or, more particularly, an increased flow of the military supplies, food, and clothing which no amounts of cash can adequately procure, are desired by the leaders of the partisans. From observations of the effect of previous provisions of such supplies, it also seems safe to conclude that the number and effectiveness of the partisans will, as in the past, vary directly with the extent of Allied assistance.

## III. ACTIVITIES

### A. Active Operations.

1. Military Operations. The nature of partisan activities clearly precludes their mounting of any large-scale military operations. Despite this limitation, there is some evidence that the partisans are able with increasing frequency to plan harassing action or to carry out tactical movements involving several thousand troops. The value of this type of military action consists in pinning down significant enemy troop concentrations, thus reducing the mobility of German defensive forces in North Italy. Complete information on specific military action carried on by partisans is not readily available because of (a) the necessary secrecy which must cloak most partisan activities and (b) the difficulties involved in collecting accurate data on a series of unconnected movements. For this reason the periods July-August 1944 and December 1944-January 1945 are chosen as illustrative of partisan activities. It will be noted that these periods closely approximate those chosen to sample partisan membership and that partisan activity tends to increase as the

war in Italy nears its climax.

In July and August the partisans were said to have constituted a significant threat to the enemy rear guard in the Gothic Line, controlled the border between France and Italy in the Aosta Valley, and dominated several large mountainous regions. In this same period they were said to have been able to intercept as much as 50 percent of enemy supplies and cause 1730 confirmed enemy casualties in various skirmishes engaging about 8500 enemy troops, plus an undeterminate number of isolated assassinations.

During the months of December and January the partisans are reported to have attacked at least eight airports, destroying four aircraft; attacked at least two enemy garrisons causing approximately 1100 enemy casualties; and engaged about 14,700 enemy troops in various operations.

2. Sabotage. Sabotage constitutes perhaps the most important contribution which the partisans make to the Allied war effort. In this connection it should be noted that much sabotage occurs as a result of milita y or semi-military action, and an attempt is made to distinguish between military operations and sabotage only for convenience of presentation.

During July and August 1944 the partisans are reliably reported to have destroyed in scattered areas ten railroad bridges, cut railroad lines in thirty-three places, and blown up several locomotives and trains. In addition, they reportedly destroyed seventeen highway bridges and caused a time bomb explosion in a Trieste cinema crowded with German soldiers.

Partisan activities in December and January are reported to have included: sabotage of traffic on the Turin-Milan railway; cutting the

rail line between Trieste and Udine; removal of twenty-four railroad switches in various parts of Veneto; demolition of a railroad bridge and tunnel in Piedmont; and destruction of seven trains carrying German personnel and supplies. Italian sources claim twenty-four acts of railroad sabotage, eleven locomotives destroyed, and four railway cars blown up in Piedmont alone during December. In the same period the partisans are reported to have destroyed five highway bridges; seized relatively large numbers of enemy weapons and vehicles, including, according to an Italian source, seventeen of the latter in Piedmont; bombed a submarine in Trieste; and been responsible for serious disorders in Turin and Milan.

All these reports are necessarily fragmentary, and may not do justice to the full scope of partisan activity. They are cited here merely to convey an impression of the type of activity engaged in.

3. Military Intelligence. The partisans are reported by both Italian and American sources to have been responsible for supplying important and accurate military intelligence to Allied Force Headquarters in Italy. In this sphere they are said to have been particularly helpful in reporting the location of enemy troop concentrations, troop or supply movements, and locations of enemy military depots. They have also provided guides to lead Allied patrols in the difficult mountain areas, and have often been instrumental in assisting escaped Allied prisoners-of-war to return to friendly territory.

B. Passive and Civil Disobedience.

Both Italian and Allied sources credit the partisans with having organized large-scale political and economic unrest in enemy-occupied territory. According to Italian Government officials, the important

strikes which almost papalyzed industrial activity at Milan in March 1944 and at Genoa in May of the same year were the result of partisan activity. Other labor disorders, strikes, slow-downs, and sabotage of industrial goods is said to have been the result of partisan civil activity.

The partisans have also carried out propaganda campaigns directed against the neo-Fascist regime and the Germans. Clandestine papers have appeared from time to time, published by various partisan political organizations; and posters and leaflets have been distributed among large sectors of the civilian population of Northern Italy. It is difficult to assess the value of these activities, since their extent, the skill with which campaigns were conceived, and administered, and the number of people reached are unknown. A measure of their efficacy may be found, however, in the fact that both neo-Fascist and German authorities have found it necessary to adopt measures involving severe penalties for the possession of partisan propaganda o for engaging in propaganda activities.

C. Enemy Reprisals and Military Measures. Possibly one of the most illuminating indications of the contributions made by the partisans to the Allied war effort is afforded by a study of German and neo-Fascist reprisals against them. The Mussolini "Government", which is apparently responsible for the administration of civil affairs in Northern Italy, has adopted several harsh, repressive measures, and has been forced to strengthen the police forces in both rural and urban areas. None of these steps, however, appears to have been fully successful, and neo-Fascist Black Brigades have been formed for the sole purpose of combatting partisan activity. Although the Black Brigades are apparently formal military units, they seem to resemble nothing more than 'vigilante' bands

and to have been on the whole unsuccessful in attempting to curb the patriots.

German retaliatory tactics have been carried out by both the Wehrmacht and units of the special German military police. In the fall of 1944 General Kesselring is reported to have issued general orders stating that persons caught in partisan activities were to be summarily executed, villages guilty of harboring partisans were to be burned, and in general utmost severity was to be employed in suppressing the patriot movement. In several cases the resistance forces have been so powerful that the Germans have had to employ mechanized troops against them in order to maintain control over militarily important areas. Swiss reports of 8 October 1944 state, for example, that strong panzer divisions and artillery were despatched against patriots then holding the Ossola Valley. In November and December of 1944 and January 1945, the Germans are reported to have continued to send heavily armed divisions against the partisans and to have been making headway in controlling the partisan movement in Piedmont. In this connection, however, it should be noted that the mobility of the partisan forces is so great that in the face of overwhelming opposition they are able to withdraw into the almost impassable mountain regions of Northern Italy or, in cases of especially determined pursuit, to move from one province to another.

## IV. RELATIONS BETWEEN PARTISANS AND ALLIED MILITARY FORCES

### A. Command and Operations.

It should be noted at the outset that problems of liaison between partisans and Allied forces are complicated by the nature of the partisan organizations and the conditions under which they necessarily operate. In many cases communications between partisan organizations deep in enemy

territory and Allies are difficult, if not impossible, to maintain in the face of active enemy pressure. In the second place the political partisans do not always admit membership in the national military forces and consequently do not feel obligated to accept commands issued to them by the Italian Government or the Allies.

Despite these factors, significant strides in coordinating partisan and Allied activities have been made, as a result of the operation of the Unified Partisan Command, headed by General Cadorna, and the efforts of Allied liaison officers detailed to contact individual partisan organizations. In the same way the operational activities of partisan operations have lately been coordinated to form part of Allied strategic planning.

B. Allied Assistance for the Partisan Movement.

Since May 1943, when the Allies first formally recognized the value of the partisan movement, efforts have been made to furnish the partisans with necessary supplies. The supply problem is complicated by three factors: (1) the difficulty of reaching partisan bands in enemy territory with supplies, which must be dropped from the air; (2) the existence of a political as well as a logistic complication in the variety of party alignments and connections, and; (3) the reported reluctance of Allied military leaders to arm political organizations which may retain their weapons after further Allied advances and subsequently constitute a threat to Allied civil administration of the territory.

As a result of all of these complications partisan leaders have often complained that they were not receiving the Allied support that their military record merits. In November 1944, General Alexander, Supreme Allied Commander of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations,

issued an order to partisan organizations to cease fighting for the winter and retire to their homes. This order was greeted with particularly vigorous criticism by the political partisans and their affiliated parties in liberated Italy on the ground that (a) partisans as individuals were known to the neo-Fascist authorities and would be summarily shot if they dared to return to their homes and (b) that the effective military cooperation which the partisans had contributed to the Allied war effort rendered such a severe command ungrateful. As a result, partisan morale is said to have been seriously affected and the relationship between the Allied Command and the partisans somewhat strained, although actual patriot activity seems to have suffered little.

C. Post Liberation Treatment by the Allies.

One of the most difficult problems confronting the Allied Command as it moves northward is the treatment of partisan organizations as the areas in which these have operated are occupied by Allied forces. Groups, often numbering several thousand partisans, many of them well armed with Allied supplies and trained under the harsh conditions of guerrila warfare, do not always meet the standards of discipline maintained in regular military forces. Moreover, the most effective of these groups belong to the political partisan forces and frequently show a tendency to demand that the political ideologies for which they have fought be translated into administrative practice by the victorious Allies.

The Allied Military Commanders responsible for conducting military operations have in many cases been criticized for failure to recognize the political implications of partisan activity, and for regarding the partisans, with their demands for recognition and a share

in administration of newly liberated territories, as something of a menace to military security. As a result, Allied practice has commonly been immediately to disarm the partisan forces, to concentrate them in camps, sometimes under Allied guards, and finally to disperse them in service forces where they are used in road repairs, supply operations, or other non-combattant roles, or to return them to civilian life in the liberated area.

Inasmuch as the partisan who returns to civilian life normally find that his property has been confiscated by the neo-Fascists, and destroyed or removed as the latter withdrew from the territory, acute suffering has often been the result. Partisan resentment against these Allied practices has risen to high levels and constitutes a serious administrative problem. The partisans claim that their contribution to the Allied war effort should be recognized at least by allowing them to incorporate partisan units as such into the regular Italian Army in order that they may carry on their struggle against the Axis. There are some indications that Allied Commanders have in some instances attempted to satisfy these partisan claims although a recent concession permitting partisan groups of up to 250 men to join regular combat units of the Italian Army scarcely solves the basic problem.

## V. RELATIONS WITH THE ROYAL ITALIAN GOVERNMENT

In view of the considerable Allied interest in the partisan movement, particularly in relation to the future peace and order of Italy, relations between the movement and the Italian Government at Rome have of necessity been largely a function of the relations of both with Allied Force Headquarters. The second Bonomi Ministry has, however, been particularly active, and partially successful, in attempting

to overcome Allied hesitation regarding close liaison with the partisans and to champion the cause of all the forces of anti-Fascist resistance.

Prior to June 1944, Allied Force Headquarters dealt directly with the various armed bands in enemy-occupied territory, largely via radio, General Wilson's instructions were addressed directly to the partisans, who in turn provided the Allies with daily communiques. Soon after assuming office in mid-June, the first Bonomi Government took up with Allied authorities the questions of granting special military status and supplies to the partisan forces and on 17 July publicly recognized the latter as an "integral part" of Italy's war effort. Six weeks later the government at Rome designated the CLNAI as the coordinating authority of all resistance activity in German-occupied territory, and Prime Minister Bonomi told the partisans in a radio address that he was seeking an agreement with the Allies for the incorporation of partisan units into the regular Italian Army.

Despite these efforts, Allied opposition to regularizing the partisans' status continued through the early winter months, for both political and military reasons. At a meeting with Allied officials in November, however, representatives of the CLNAI expressed the hope that they would be recognized by the Bonomi Government as a part thereof, and, as a result, Allied military authorities were reported to have modified their position to the extent of encouraging the Rome Ministry to recognize the Milan CLN as the provisional civil authority in areas under its influence, and General Cadorna as the supreme leader of the resistance movement.

The leftist parties in liberated Italy took the occasion of the cabinet crisis of November-December 1944 to intensify their earlier

demands for extended recognition by the Italian Government of the CLNAI;[1] and on 28 November, the Northern Committee sent a message to the Central Committee of Liberation at Rome stating that "the Italian Government cannot command the cooperation and support of the North unless it is representative of the Committees of National Liberation."

The establishment in the second Bonomi Cabinet of 12 December of a Ministry of Occupied Territories, with a Communist Minister, was a step apparently designed to convince the Northern Committee of the sympathetic attitude of the Rome Government, and, as stated by the Minister, to form an intermediary body between the former and the Allies. In fact, on 26 December it was announced that, with Allied approval, an agreement had been reached between the CLNAI and the Italian Government whereby the latter recognized the Committee "as the organ of anti-Fascist parties in enemy-occupied territories" and designated it the government's representative in the war against the neo-Fascists and Germans. The CLNAI agreed for its part to act as the delegate of an Italian Government recognized by the Allies and to accept that government as the only lawful authority in areas turned over to it by the Allied Military Government. That any agreement at all was reached seems to indicate Allied recognition of leftist demands in liberated Italy; the Allies' firm hand in retaining a measure of control over events of the future is, however, clearly discernible.

That the Bonomi Government has been the suitor both of the CLNAI and the Allies as regards the partisan movement is further suggested in the public statements and actions of Mauro Scoccimarro, the new Minister

1. In fact, it has been observed that many of the criticisms leveled at the Government by the parties of the left have been in regard to matters in which the Government, by reason of Allied interest and control, has not had responsibility or power.

for Occupied Territories. According to him, the Ministry will be divided into military, economic, and public welfare sections, and will have two principal objectives: first, to promote the unity of all partisan groups under General Cadorna; and second, as noted above, to be the intermediary between the CLNAI and the Allies in matters pertaining to the prosecution of the war and to treatment of partisans and local Committees of National Liberation. The Ministry has, after a slow start, begun a program of widespread publicity of partisan activity and of steps taken in support thereof, apparently with a view to arousing public knowledge of and enthusiasm for the resistance movement.

It seems clear at the present time, therefore, that relations between the Italian Government and the partisans are based on the one hand upon the determination of the latter to protect their political position, and on the other, upon Allied determination to preclude patriot-inspired post-liberation disorders. The dual problem is apparently to be dealt with by propaganda designed to ingratiate the government in the eyes of the patriots and render Allied opposition to consolidation of the partisans publicly unpopular.